



This photograph of a Washington, D.C., elementary school class was taken by Francis B. Johnston, circa 1899. Between the 1899 and 1979 school years, U.S. public school enrollment grew from 15.5 million to 41.6 million.

Teaching in America

Since last spring, when the National Commission on Excellence in Education decried the “rising tide of mediocrity” in America’s schools, a succession of blue-ribbon panels has joined in the chorus of condemnation and the search for effective reforms. Americans are again re-evaluating their expensive system of public education.

The chief problem, a by-product of America’s turbulent 1960s, lies in the high school classroom. As researchers note, many, perhaps most, teachers now make a tacit deal with their restless students: “If you keep quiet, I won’t make you work too hard.”

The cumulative effects have been dramatic: One-third of 17-year-olds do no homework; 10 to 15 percent of high school graduates are functionally illiterate; one-fourth of *college* math courses are remedial; one-fourth of the Navy’s recruits cannot read well enough to understand simple printed safety rules.

Our contributors variously summarize the latest research; Denis Doyle, looking to the future, sees a rare opportunity to upgrade teaching in the nation’s schools.

WANTING IT ALL

by Patricia Albjerg Graham

The central quandary facing American teachers today is the lack of clarity regarding the purpose of the schools in which they work, the nature of the larger educational system of which those schools are but a part, and the relationship between the two. If education is more than mere schooling—and it is—then we should have been asking ourselves which educational activities truly belong outside the classroom door. Yet, increasingly during this century, and particularly in the years since World War II, we seem to have had as much trouble raising that question as we have had answering it.

The New England Puritans of the 17th century had no such problem. The purpose of education, they believed, was to prepare children to lead a moral and virtuous life; that task was shared, as a matter of course, among church, family, the larger

community, and, to a lesser degree, the schools. Because the role of schools was limited, the performance of teachers was a matter of limited concern.

Three centuries later, with formal schooling available to all and the responsibilities of each school more diverse, the old-fashioned certainties are not so obvious. Americans no longer agree on what a proper education (in a larger sense) consists of, or on what its ends should be, or on what proportion of those ends is best accomplished by the school (rather than by parents, neighbors, clergymen, and so on). Teachers, as a result, have been left adrift. They do not know whether their responsibilities are primarily cognitive or custodial or social, whether their aim is to produce good students or good citizens or both. They do not know where to focus their attention. Have they, for example, a special obligation to the bottom quartile of the class? Or to the top quartile? Or, heaven forbid, are teachers supposed to help every pupil do the best he or she can, patiently leading each along until achievement lives up to potential?

High School for Everybody

Teachers cannot answer such questions, let alone thornier ones, by themselves, and the lack of guidance from politicians, parents, and school boards makes harder a job that is already hard enough. There are reasons why that guidance has rarely been forthcoming, reasons why the messages to teachers about what they should be doing have been garbled. The fact is that the texture of life in the United States, of life as each of us lives it both in public and in private, has changed profoundly during the past four decades. Teachers were not the chief agents of social change. But they, perhaps more than any other professional group, have had to cope with the consequences.

The first of the several trends that complicated the task of teaching, and also made it more important, was the advent of mass education, mass secondary education in particular. In

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1890, only seven percent of American youths between 14 and 17 were enrolled in school. High school, the National Education Association then observed, was reserved for the few "who show themselves able to profit by an education prolonged to the eighteenth year, and whose parents are able to support them while they remain so long at school." But an industrializing America required more of its workers. In 1945, the proportion of the 14–17 age group enrolled in high school had grown to 69 percent. By 1980, the figure was 93 percent—although only 72 percent graduated. Had all who graduated been able to perform at the 12th-grade level academically, we would have had much to be proud of. Unfortunately, that was not the case, although the certification provided by a high school diploma suggested that it was.

Good-bye to Algebra

The effect of mass education has not been confined to the academic side of schooling. As more and more children spent more and more time in the classroom, schools assumed growing responsibility for child-rearing. Between 1950 and 1980, the proportion of all families headed by a single parent (usually the mother) grew from 7.4 to 19.5 percent. Even in two-parent families, the mother, who in times past had often served as tutor, counselor, and conscience, was spending less and less time at home. By 1982, 66 percent of mothers with school-aged children held full- or part-time jobs (versus 35 percent in 1951). This second basic trend—the post-1950s restructuring of family and job market—gave the schools a set of new burdens with which teachers had to contend.

In response, educators developed a whole new array of subjects, marginally academic or not academic at all. Courses on alcohol and drug abuse, sexual conduct, and "consumer affairs" were added to the classroom menu. Between the mid-1960s and late 1970s, the proportion of graduating high school seniors who had received academic credit for driver education grew from less than one percent to 59 percent; for courses on "marriage and adult living," the figure rose from one to 16 percent. Meanwhile, the proportion of graduating seniors who had passed chemistry dropped from 51 to 45 percent, and the number who had completed intermediate algebra and introductory Spanish also declined.

Writing in *Daedalus* in 1981, David K. Cohen and Barbara Neufeld argued that the proliferation of curricular offerings had transformed high schools, in particular, into "a sort of state-

supported social agency for adolescents at loose ends.”

While all of this was going on, a third factor expanded the schools' social role. Across the country, communities, like families, were becoming less cohesive. The U.S. economy, increasingly urban and corporate, demanded a mobile work force. The face of residential America changed accordingly. Vast housing developments, served by shopping malls, sprang up in the suburbs, providing shelter for transient families until the next job transfer took them someplace else.

TV As Nanny

Suburbia had its positive side. More middle-class and blue-collar families enjoyed a convenient compromise between urban amenities and rural elbow room. The increasing disorder and crime of the cities was left behind. But gone now was the circle of lifelong neighbors who, in earlier times, had extended beyond the home the family's protection and guidance of children. Mothers could no longer assume that their youngsters were always under watchful eyes. Playmates, and their parents, came and went; housing turnover was high.

Amid the commotion, the school stood out as a pillar of relative stability. After-school sports moved from the street or the corner playground to the high school gym, which also served as the site for weekend dances. Teachers found themselves supervising elections for Homecoming Queen and scheduling exams around pep rallies.

Not long after the schools began doubling as social centers, they became social laboratories as well. President Lyndon Johnson, a former teacher, decided early in his administration that schools could help lead the nation toward the Great Society. “Onto my desk each day come the problems of 190 million men and women,” he told a group of visiting educators in 1964. “When we consider these problems, when we study them, when we analyze them, when we evaluate what can be done, the answer almost always comes down to one word: education.”

Johnson waged his wars on poverty and racial discrimination largely in the classroom. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provided money to upgrade libraries, buy new textbooks, and give special instruction to children from low-income families. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 reinforced the Supreme Court's 1954 ban on segregation in schools, requiring equal access to facilities involved in federally funded programs. Desegregation was long overdue. But rapid court-ordered shifts in enrollment focused the attention of many schools, North and

During the 1982–83 school year, New York City officials recorded 564 assaults on teachers on public school grounds.



South, on nonacademic matters.

Finally, even as schoolfolk were assuming obligations jettisoned or imposed by home and community, they faced stiff competition from a young upstart—the electronic media. The precocious growth of television since midcentury represents the last of the major forces that have heightened the uncertainty of the teaching profession.

Parents may have wanted schools to “do more,” but they also seemed quite ready to let television play the role of nanny and friendly neighbor to their kids. The average child between the ages of six and 11 watched almost 29 hours of television per week in 1980, compared with 21 hours per week in 1966 and virtually none in 1950 (when only nine percent of American homes had TV sets). Teachers were caught in the middle, struggling for their pupils’ attention while being blamed for failure by parents who were often happy to let Donna Reed do the baby-sitting at home. Television has competed not only for students’ time, but for their psyches as well. Its messages, though incalculable in their effects, do not seem designed to shore up traditional values. An eight-year-old can learn many things from the average situation comedy. The virtues of hard work and self-discipline are not likely to be among them.

The five major trends just cited, from mass education to mass communication, all affected the complex balance of institutional responsibility for education. And it may be that as the schools' duties increased, their effectiveness diminished. Certainly, the rising tide of criticism of teachers and their schools had coincided with an ever-expanding definition of what formal education should amount to. Historically, the two have gone hand in hand.

As Lawrence Cremin has pointed out, American schools in the early decades of the century were already on the way to becoming "legatee institutions," inheriting new obligations. In the process, teachers increasingly came under attack. The fact that they had been saddled with new responsibilities did not spare them from criticism. "Seldom is the distance between what a profession thinks it is doing and what it is actually doing so great as in the case of teachers," wrote an editorialist in the *Social Frontier* in 1935. Teachers were variously deemed too inexperienced, too stupid, too old, too boring, too strict, too lax. Some of them undoubtedly were.

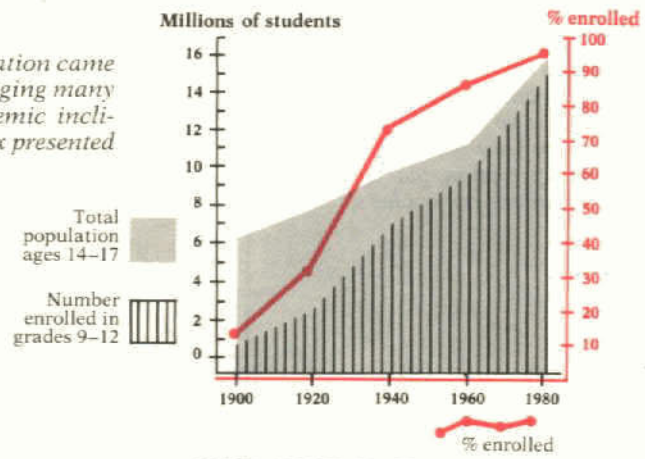
But, then as now, narrow criticisms often missed the more fundamental question, the question of function and purpose. How much, realistically, can we ask schools to do?

Soul-Searching

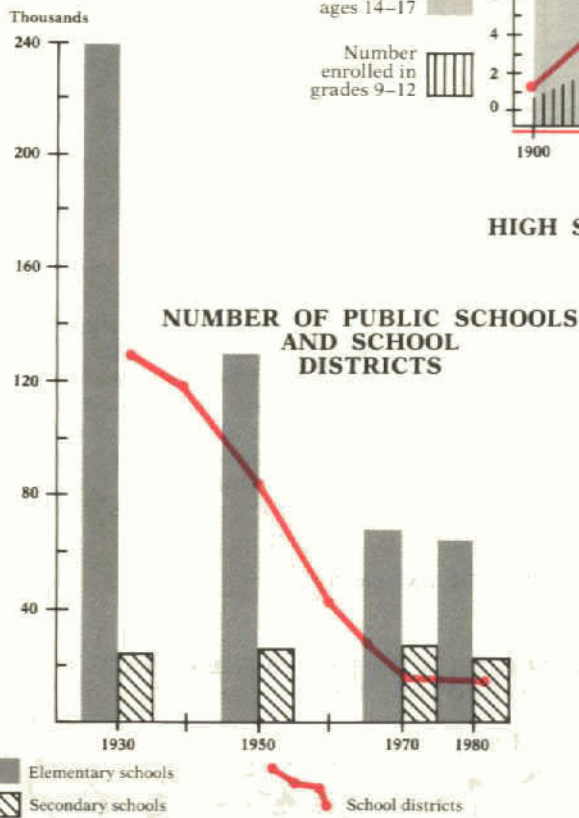
Public dissatisfaction with the public schools began to mount during the early 1950s as articulate critics, mainly from outside of education, took aim at professional educators and fired with devastating results. Teachers, they said, were neglecting the basics. They spent too much time on nonacademic subjects. They relaxed standards to enliven traditional courses. Style had won out over substance. "The issue is drawn between those who believe that good teaching should be directed to sound intellectual ends, and those who are content to dethrone intellectual values and cultivate the techniques of teaching for their own sake, in an intellectual and cultural vacuum." So wrote Arthur Bestor, whose *Educational Wastelands* (1953) and *The Restoration of Learning* (1955) ushered in a flurry of "back-to-basics" literature.

In 1957, the Soviet Union unwittingly galvanized American concern over elementary and high school academic programs. By launching Sputnik, the world's first space satellite, the Russians spread the soul-searching from the intellectuals to the people. Educational reform now had political momentum. A \$1.1-billion National Defense Education Act was passed by Con-

From 1900 to 1960, mass education came to the high schools (right), bringing many students with no strong academic inclination. For teachers, this influx presented a pedagogical challenge . . .

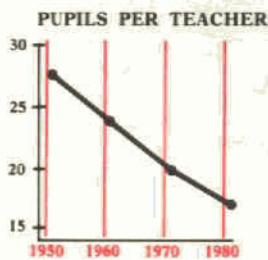


HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

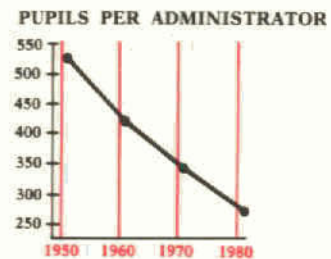


For administrators, the challenge was bureaucratic. Districts, particularly rural ones, consolidated schools and merged with other districts (left) . . .

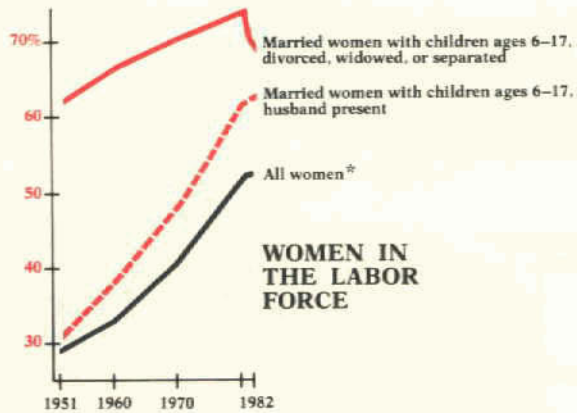
Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.



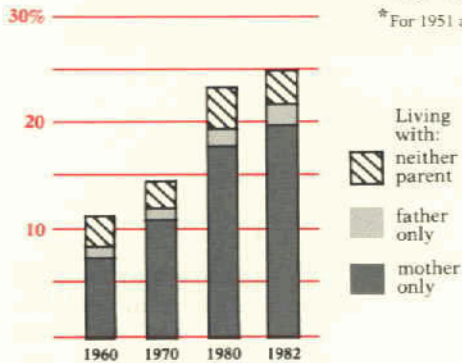
But efficiency has not increased, at least not in terms of the number of teachers and administrators required to educate a student. During the 1982-83 school year, \$117.6 billion was spent on public education.



The growing percentage of women in the labor force (right) and rising family break-up rates (below) leave youths with less home supervision, placing new burdens on teachers.



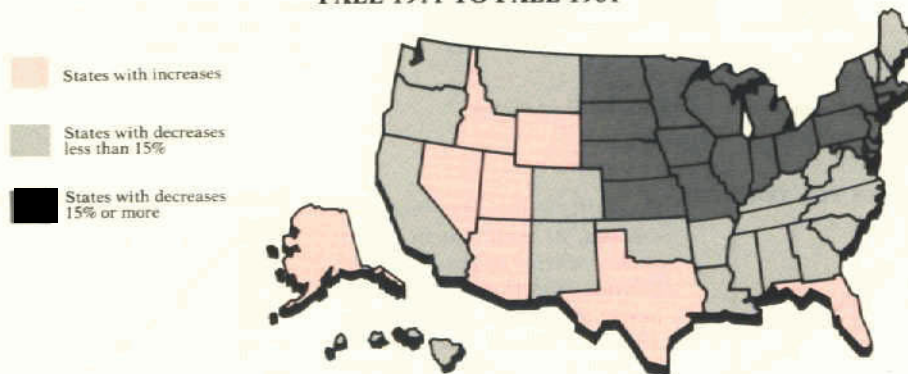
* For 1951 and 1960, includes only women who are or have been married.



Migration from the Northeast to the South and West (as reflected below) has created temporary teacher shortages in some Sunbelt cities. School districts in Texas and California have placed ads for teachers in Boston and New York newspapers.

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER 18

CHANGES IN PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT, BY STATE: FALL 1971 TO FALL 1981



Source: U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census; U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

gress in 1958, providing money to beef up math, science, and foreign language instruction (among other things). "We are engaged in a grim duel" for technological supremacy, warned Admiral Hyman G. Rickover.

The popular critique of public education soon evolved into an attack on teachers—and on teachers' colleges, the old normal schools. *The Education of American Teachers* (1963), by James B. Conant, former president of Harvard, and the vitriolic (and generally accurate) *The Miseducation of American Teachers* (1963), by James D. Koerner, president of the Council for Basic Education, set the tone. The theme permeating the protest literature was that teachers were incompetent, their incompetence reinforced by the professional educators they encountered in schools of education. As a result, American children were not learning as much or as well as they ought to be. Koerner's solution: "The remaining teachers' colleges of the United States should be shut down."

Crop-Dusting

In practice, efforts at reform focused, first, on placing public education in the hands of teachers trained in subject-matter disciplines, not in the ever-changing science of pedagogy; and, second, on enticing a new breed into teaching. The latter effort was aided by administrators at Harvard, Chicago, Stanford, and other universities, who set up Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) programs. Their goal was to channel a more academically advanced cadre of recruits, drawn from prestigious liberal arts institutions, notably eastern women's colleges, into the elementary and high school classroom.

The plan worked—for a few years. But the Radcliffe, Vassar, and Smith graduates who received their master's degrees soon found that, while teacher training had been modified, teaching conditions had not. For most MAT recipients, the classroom proved to be simply the first step on a road to other careers,—in business, philanthropy, law, or homemaking. Some became administrators, in schools or in other education-related organizations. Harvard closed its MAT program in 1973.

One alternative to reforming the education profession—an alternative that was attractive to many—was turning over the job to others better equipped to educate the young. Some believed that the task was simply a matter of providing a better, more rigorous curriculum, and the National Science Foundation spent \$117 million between 1954 and 1975 on curriculum development, most of it organized by physicists, chemists, biol-

ogists, and other scientists at major universities. There was even some money to retrain teachers so they could understand the new material.

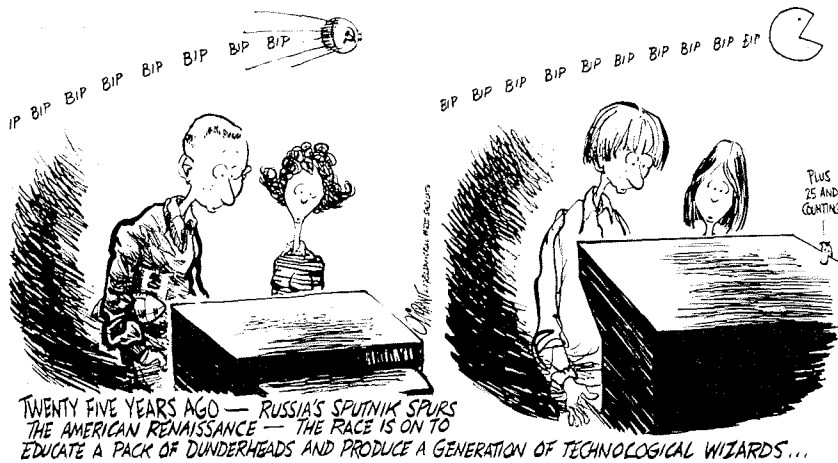
Meanwhile, private enterprise entered the arena with the "teacher-proof" curriculum, the assumption being that children would learn best if someone other than the teacher on the spot figured out just how the child should study the lesson. Intervention by the instructor was thought to be damaging—and, thanks to technology, possibly obsolete. In the Midwest during the 1950s, a four-engine airplane circled over six states, beaming prepackaged lessons onto closed-circuit television screens. In 1961, PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations)—the first of many computerized teaching systems—made its debut at the Urbana-Champaign campus of the University of Illinois.

Yet despite attempts at educational "crop-dusting," despite the plethora of audio-visual equipment acquired by schools (and largely locked away in school storerooms), despite the transformation of school libraries (at least in name) into media centers, the great technological revolution in education failed to occur during the 1960s and '70s. To most teachers, Plato remained a Greek of distant memory.

O, Relevance

What is most striking about the educational climate of the past 35 years is the remarkable immunity that school people—instructors and administrators alike—felt from the criticism swirling about them, an immunity due partly to the demographic anomaly of the 1950s and '60s. With Baby-Boom enrollments rising, educators were a relatively scarce commodity. Even bad, they were often good enough. At the same time, the country's financial commitment to the schools was growing. The proportion of the gross national product spent on schools (including higher education), which had hovered around three percent from 1929 to 1959, reached 7.5 percent in 1969 and eight percent in 1975. With new schools going up and throngs of new students crowding the classrooms, teachers could afford to ignore the grumbling of the critics.

That immunity from rhetorical attack is one reason why the post-Sputnik emphasis on academic excellence failed to penetrate the schools more deeply than it did. There were other reasons, too. The 1960s brought vigorous criticism by the young of the "establishment" and the older generation. In the minds of students, teachers represented both. For many teachers, maintaining classroom order (and their own sanity) became a full-



The launching of Sputnik in 1957 prompted politicians and educators to voice renewed concern over the schools, but only six years later the long decline in students' SAT scores began.

time job. Academic matters took a back seat. Besides, the idea of devoting special attention to budding young scientists and engineers had an elitist ring to it. Elitism was emphatically not on the political agenda of the 1960s. Egalitarianism was. Compensatory education programs such as Head Start arrived on the scene. Teachers and supervisors embarked on a wave of experimentation. "Relevance," "open classrooms," "self-paced instruction," "affective education"—these were the watchwords of the day.

But the late 1970s and early 1980s have brought a reaction. Public discourse on education has reverted to the no-nonsense tone of the Sputnik era. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, whose widely read report was issued last year, concluded that Americans have, "in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament." Fingers are being pointed once again at teachers.

There are, however, crucial differences between the debate of 1957 and that being waged today. Now the external threat depicted is as much commercial as military—the adversary as likely to be Japan as the Soviet Union. Where post-Sputnik reformers called for cultivation of a competitive scientific and technical elite, reformers now demand *mass* improvement, contending that long-term economic health requires a more

broadly based excellence than winning the space race did.

There is one more vital difference: The days of rising enrollments and ever-greater spending are gone, and gone with them is the teachers' immunity from criticism. The number of annual U.S. births peaked in 1957 at 4.3 million. By 1975, enrollment was declining, schools were shutting down, "tenured" teachers were getting pink slips, and the percentage of GNP devoted to education was beginning to drop.

American teachers today face once more the dilemma they encountered during the late 1950s: The public expects more from the schools than just "book learning" but will accept no commensurate sacrifice of academic excellence.

The conflict between these demands, however, is more glaring now than it was after Sputnik. The intervening decades have been tumultuous. As noted, the family and many communities have become less and less stable. Respect for those in authority—be it teachers, parents, or public officials—has eroded. The electronic age has given birth to a new generation of distractions with names such as "Space Invaders," "Pac Man," and "Zaxxon." But if the problems go beyond the classroom, the solutions must still be found there—that, at least, is the curious bit of popular logic with which teachers must live.

The question for educators today, teachers in particular, is how to turn public dissatisfaction to good use. For one thing, teachers should become involved in the debate over what must be done to improve our schools; they know a great deal about what is feasible and what is not, and they know first-hand how elusive "improvement" will be without a clear statement of what the schools are supposed to achieve. What, precisely, are our goals? Teachers should also recognize that public attention, even if critical, has its value. They need that stimulus to push them to do better what they already do. Above all, they need what they are now getting: the implicit recognition by other Americans that what they do is important.

